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SUBJECT: NDC OPENS 2008 CAMPAIGN: JOBS AND A DAY OF JOHNS

11. (U) SUMMARY: Ghana's main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), on May 7 opened its 2008 campaign with a populist message of jobs, economic improvement, and an end to government corruption. Presidential candidate John Atta Mills officially introduced his running mate, Northern Region MP John Dramani Mahama. Mills pledged to end profligate public sector spending, and to confront Ghana's growing role as a transshipment point for illegal drugs. The NDC is running under the slogan "A Better Ghana: Investing in People, Jobs and the Economy." END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Speaking to a standing room audience of party faithful at the National Theatre on May 7, NDC Presidential Candidate John Atta Mills unveiled his party's 2008 election platform under the theme of "A Better Ghana: Investing in People, Jobs and the Economy." Mills outlined four thematic points that will be the party's message: 1) investing in people, 2) a strong economy, with more jobs, 3) investment in infrastructure, and 4) transparent, honest government. Speaking through an Akan proverb, Mills said "you provide basic needs first," and referenced the new presidential palace and jet as examples of profligate spending by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government. He said that a NDC government would improve the economy, rekindle national spirit, champion the middle classes, and reunite the nation. Mills reminisced about his humble origins as the son of a school teacher and a petty trader, saying he "wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth."

13. (SBU) Mills said that Ghana needed to "redeem its image as a drug trading center," and pledged that he would not allow Ghana to be "a wholly owned subsidiary of drug violence" -- lines that brought an ovation from the party faithful (COMMENT: Ghana's rise as a center for narcotics shipments has a political dimension, with one NPP parliamentarian serving time in a U.S. prison for smuggling, and at least two other MPs believed to be involved in drug trafficking. While this is a message the USG certainly wants to hear, Mills' remark is also a reminder to the public of a NPP weakness. END COMMENT).

14. (U) Mills, in the Ghanaian political vernacular, "outdoored" his running mate, officially introducing John Dramani Mahama. Mahama, a former Minister of Communications and a current MP from the Northern Region, is popular with the party, and should be an effective campaigner. Mahama called on NDC supporters to focus on the issues and run a clean campaign, so that the results of voting show "an exact mandate." He pledged that the NDC would bring about lasting solutions to conflicts in the north, most of which resolve around chieftancy disputes. He appealed to the people of Bawku, scene of street violence earlier in the week, "to lay down their arms and give peace a chance."

¶5. (U) Warming up the crowd for the candidates, Party General Secretary Johnson Asiedu Nketia called on President Kufour to fully fund the Electoral Commission. Noting that a supplemental budget had not been passed by Parliament to cover a projected \$20 million funding shortfall. Nketia said that the Government had either not provided the funds, or not provided them in a constitutional manner. Ensuring a fair election was theme of all the main speakers.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Mills' message of economic populism should play well with voters hit hard by rising prices and inadequate infrastructure. Accra continues to experience water and electricity shortages that disrupt the daily lives of citizens. Food and fuel prices also continue to climb weekly. There is also a level of public frustration with increasing levels of corruption and crime, and the issue of the drug trade hit a strong cord with party members. The NDC's concern about funding for the Electoral Commission is shared by many observers, although President Kufour announced earlier this week that the EC would be fully funded. END COMMENT.
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